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AUTHOR Atmore, Eric
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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education and care (educare) combined with community development presents a unique opportunity to stimulate the disadvantaged and oppressed sectors of the population towards improved economic status, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and human development. The three main elements of this approach are the community, parental involvement, and empowerment. Research results indicate that for children from deprived groups, intervention must consider the needs of the whole child within the context of the family and community. Community support and parent involvement are key variables in the operation of preschools and other services for children under five. Child care has great potential for driving the empowerment process at the local level. Educare contributes by facilitating mutual respect among parents and other caregivers and by fostering critical reflection. The process of community development in the educare context involves: (1) identifying needs through community and educare profiles, and needs assessment; (2) prioritizing these needs; (3) developing, implementing, and monitoring a plan of action to meet the needs; and (4) evaluating the process and outcomes. While the community worker plays several important roles in this process, he or she does not lead, manage, or own the process or the product. Community development is about individual human action and the development of people. (AC)

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A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCARE INTERVENTION IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

BY

ERIC ATMORE

Grassroots Educare Trust
P O Box 38055
Gatesville 7764
SOUTH AFRICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education and care (educare) is concerned with the important foundation years. The particular merit of early childhood educare is that it aims to meet the developmental needs of the young child in such a way that he/she can become an integrated part of the social, cultural and economic community.

At the same time increasing urbanisation and industrialisation and the disruption it causes to the extended family unit; the erosion of traditional child-care practices; the dramatic increase in the number of women in the work force and the increasing number of single parents has set up an unprecedented demand for preschool educare services especially in disadvantaged communities. Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are most likely to suffer deprivation under these circumstances and are therefore in particular need of support.

In disadvantaged communities parents see educare as an antidote to the risk factors surrounding their children and families. They know the risks inherent in their environment and see educare as a way out. Community workers have found that concern about the needs of young children often provides a starting point for community development.

But it is not only the family which needs and benefits from the service. Early childhood educare takes place in a community context as well and as such plays an important role in community life. When it is people-centred it can be a catalyst for the development of individuals, groups and communities; it can be a stimulus for personal growth; and the mobilisation of disadvantaged communities can be initiated or significantly aided by involving parents and communities in the development and running of preschool educare programmes. The need for educare thus cannot be seen in isolation from the needs of the family and the community as a whole.

There have been attempts to devise strategies to meet the needs of disadvantaged young children predominantly through school readiness and therapeutic intervention. Most often these have been undertaken in isolation from the wider community and the benefits contained therein.

The van Leer Foundation in a report (van Leer Foundation, 1981:17) reports that

> *'The evidence of the last twenty years or so, in which various multilateral and bilateral aid programmes have been developed for the Third World countries, has demonstrated the inadequacy of models drawn from the Western experience to meet the needs and problems of the developing societies. This has been particularly true in the field of education'.*

and the summary report of the seventh Southern Africa seminar of the van Leer Foundation states that

> *'... the provision of adequate care and educational services for disadvantaged under-fives is essential, and creative thinking is required to harness all available resources to this end. Furthermore, the importance of parent participation and community involvement in education programmes for young children has been re-emphasised in recent years...Those in favour of alternative models and programmes recognise that the family is the first and most influential educational agent in the child's life, particularly during the early years, and also that preschool programmes can play an important role in community development.'*
>
> (ELRU 1984:12)

It is believed that an approach to educare intervention which increases the capacity of people to deal with their needs and which takes the development of the people in the community as it's focus, is more likely produce quality educare provision than one which ignores the community development potential.

ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The three main elements to this approach are the community, parental

involvement and empowerment.

The Community

Research results as reported by the Strathclyde Regional Council (1985) indicates that for children from the most deprived groups, no strategy of intervention that focusses attention solely on the parent-child relationship is likely to be effective. What is called for is intervention in the environment.

Short (1988) in a paper reviewing preschool needs and provision writes that strategies for the provision of services for preschool children must take into consideration the needs of the whole child within the context of the family and community development, and that these needs differ within and between communities. She suggests that what one might be looking at is a complex interlocking of strategies designed to mobilise as many resources as possible to meet the varied needs of as many children as possible, but this process must involve a wide range of people who are concerned about the needs of young children, including parents, other community members, those involved directly in preschool provision, and funding agents. In an earlier paper Short (1984) writes that this belief that educare should be community-based rests upon the following principles;

- The family should retain as much responsibility for child care and education as possible, or in other words, the family should receive as much help and support as it needs.

- The community should decide what services are needed by the families in that community, or families should be able to choose what services they wish to make use of.

- The community should be responsible for setting up and managing the services, or at least be actively involved in service provision.

- Professionalisation of services is not important and may even be considered undesirable. The skills of community members should be used as far as possible.

- The community, usually meaning the families who use the services, should pay for the services.

A report on the viability and progress of preschools in the most disadvantaged rural areas of the Eastern Cape, South Africa records that

> *'...community support is, however, probably the most significant variable in the operation of the schools, not primarily for the material benefits it brings...but for the morale of the teachers and the educational benefit of the children'.*
>
> (Whisson and Manona, 1990:8)

The independent, community backed preschool, they say, not only educates children in how to respond to formal education, it also educates their parents to participate fully in the process and to ask questions where appropriate.

> *'Seen as an institution set in a community, the schools will flourish only if they have the support of the community as a whole - which, (in that context), in practice, means the farm owners or managers, the leading workers and the parents'.*
>
> (Ibid:17)

Cohen (1991:30) concurs writing that *'...the only thing which seemed to unite people in a scattered, unmotivated community was their concern for the education of their small children'.* For her *preschools were always seen as facilities that must be of the community and integrated into community life.*

Parental Involvement

There can be no question about the influence that parents have on the educational development of their children. Unfortunately, many

disadvantaged parents who themselves have had limited exposure to education, tend to feel inadequate in this role and withdraw from meaningful participation. Several authors (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Levenstein, 1972; Karnes et al, 1973) have found that where parents are centrally involved in the educational process their children have made cognitive gains which have not been lost over time. These studies show that where young children receive help and encouragement from parents their educational achievements are higher than children from homes with equivalent socio-economic status but less parental help.

This is corroborated by others (Willmon, 1969; Swan and Stavros, 1973) who have accumulated evidence of the effectiveness of parent involvement in young children's education in influencing academic motivation. Available evidence, therefore, points to the desirability of involving parents in their children's early education. Davie (1990:10) states that

> *'In disadvantaged communities, parental empowerment is crucial to the optimum development of the child. No matter how good the preschool service, without parental engagement, it will only partially succeed. Parental education programmes, based on the enhancement of self-image, personal growth and communication skills, therefore have a pivotal role to play in the creation of an environment which is conducive to the healthy development of the child.'*

The Strathclyde Regional Council in a Report on Under Fives (1985:45) write that

> *'The active involvement of parents in planning and running pre-five services is essential for the long-term benefit of the children, as well as benefitting the parents themselves...The greatest resource in any community for the provision of services to pre-fives and parents is the parents themselves.'*

The conviction that parent involvement is an important ingredient for sustaining programme accomplishments after a young child's participation in an educare programme has led to a belief that to work with children alone is not sufficient.

Empowerment

Van der Eyken (1989) comments that of the many functions of a community, child care is one which carries the greatest potential for driving the empowerment process at the local level. The interconnectedness of child care with family life, social networks, school, parents' work, health care, and religion make it a strategic hub from which the empowerment process can radiate. Educare can contribute to the empowerment process of an entire community by facilitating mutually respectful interactions among parents and other caregivers and by fostering a critical reflection process leading to joint action to change the institutions controlling the allocation of resources.

He identifies the elements of empowerment as being an ongoing process, centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation; and implying control over resources and individual lives. The outcomes of empowerment are that there may be some rather generic changes in individuals, groups, communities, networks and institutions, that result from long-term engagement in the empowerment process.

Paz and Paz (1988) feel that without the empowerment of the community, without the involvement of patterns of self-help, self-reliance and self-activation; without the fostering and support of local initiatives; indeed, without the community's assumption of responsibility and control for it's own affairs and functioning - without all these, the success of the most well-meaning early childhood educational programme will be partial, at best.

Govender (1987:145) writes that

'In order to overcome disadvantage and assure

children of the optimal conditions for their development and growth, we must dedicate our efforts to the empowerment of the child, the parent and the community'.

INTERVENTION IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES - THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The process of community development is really quite simple. The theory tells us that there are various stages in intervention, which are roughly sequential, through which community development proceeds. These are;

- identifying community needs
- prioritizing these needs
- developing a plan of action to meet needs
- implementing the plan of action
- evaluation of the process and outcomes.

1) Identifying community educare needs

In identifying community educare needs there are three main tools; the community profile, the educare profile and the needs assessment.

The community profile

Essential to assisting communities is a thorough knowledge of the community in which intervention is undertaken. This involves knowing the community make up, the history, demography, culture, values and norms, and who the legitimate community leadership is. It involves gathering opinions and facts. Whilst constructing the profile the community developer is also identifying actors in the community, engaged in preliminary needs assessment and together with community members is devising strategies for meeting needs.

Actors need to be identified around which the intervention can be

planned. These are usually individuals who have requested intervention and includes community members who have a contribution to make. A snowball technique of identifying such individuals usually expands the group.

The educare profile

Where a project already exists a profile of the service offered in all its' aspects is constructed. This informs the community of areas which require intervention and development. The educare project profile covers the physical structure, human resources, financial resources, administrative capacity and training received or needed. The profile assists with developing a plan of action for meeting the expressed needs.

The needs assessment

The needs assessment begins from the point of asking community members what they want, starting with the peoples' concerns, becoming aware of the gaps between reality and desire. Various techniques can be used for assessing needs. These range from the normative approach in which services offered in a disadvantaged community are compared to what is on offer in other more advantaged communities, to the expressed needs approach where a need is defined and its' strength measured by the number of individuals recording their need in some form, for example waiting lists in an educare facility.

2) **Prioritizing needs**

Once the educare needs of the community or project have been identified and agreed upon (by the community members not the professional) they need to be prioritized. With limited resources and personpower it is unlikely that all needs will be tackled immediately.

3) **Developing a plan of action**

The plan of action is task orientated and answers the question "what must be done ?" by determining who must do it, how it must be done, where it must be done and by when. The plan of action is a community plan and the community development worker plays a supportive and technical role only.

4) **Implementation and Monitoring**

An important part of the intervention process which is often taken forgranted, overlooked or done on behalf of communities is implementation and monitoring. Like all tasks in community development these are best done by community members themselves. Implementation,executing tasks is the responsibility of community members assisted and supported by the community developer.

Monitoring is a constant and everyday activity. It involves checking performance against plans and objectives, adapting or changing these plans where necessary, and slowing down or speeding up as the case may be. Again these are tasks for community members.

5) **Evaluation**

Evaluation is an essential part of community development and is an on-going element of the community development process. On evaluation three simple questions need to be asked;

- where have we come from ?
- where are we now ?
- where are we going to ?

This will give the community a basis from which to restart the cycle.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY WORKER

The role of the community developer has been described variously as

- conducting needs analysis and research

- problem solving with groups and communities
- advocating/lobbying
- networking
- conscientizing people and communities
- being a resource
- facilitating community participation
- planning
- negotiating, mediating, and resolving conflict
- mobilizing
- organising
- educating communities and individuals

It involves all of these with one important rider. It must be done with what Father Gerard Pantin of the SERVOL project in the West Indies termed "respectful intervention", that is, it must take the people of the community, their culture, norms and values into account. It must be sensitive to the people of the community.

The professional is peripheral to the process. He does not lead, manage or own the process or the product. He does not do for people. He does not solve people's problems. He does not make people dependent. Success must be dependent on the peoples' own efforts and creativity rather than on the community developer. The community developers role is about people development and empowerment.

PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT

An approach as outlined focuses on the development of people. Community development is about individual human action. A major task then in providing educare within the context of community development is to enhance individual and community capacity.

Freire (1972:38) spoke of the oppressed as

> *'So often do they hear that they are good for nothing and are incapable of learning anything - that they are sick, lazy and unproductive -*

that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness'

No development activity can hope to succeed unless it contains a strong element of human development. This means strengthening the individual, empowering the individual, through the acquisition of skills, knowledge and information. If the disadvantaged and oppressed are to manage and control their own destiny then they must gain self-confidence and increase self-esteem.

Those who have worked in community development with disadvantaged communities have found that constructive participation requires a number of skills. People must learn how to express themselves, how to research and analyze, how to do a needs assessment, how to decide and to implement decisions made. There is a need for conflict resolution skills and communication skills. A major part of adult development for educare is keeping records, financial management, report writing and accountability.

Perhaps the most important contribution that development makes is to help to regain their self-confidence and to increase self-esteem enabling them to fight oppression, disadvantage and poverty. As we know this cannot be taught, it must be developed. It is with this in mind that educare development projects begins to take on wider ramifications that simply preschool provision.

CONCLUSION

Early education projects presents a unique opportunity to develop children, parents and communities. Early childhood educare and community development offers an intervention strategy which is capable of stimulating the disadvantaged and oppressed sectors of the population towards improved economic status, increased self-confidence and self-esteem and human development through their own initiative. It potentially enables communities to gain power and resources through community action. It can empower children, parents and communities.

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